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Will Health Literacy Research and Initiatives End the Confusion?

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Will Health Literacy Research and Initiatives End the Confusion?

The Internet gives patients unprecedented abilities to learn about their health conditions. It also helps patients play an educated, active role in their health care in ways that were previously impossible. With the help of search engines such as Google™, patients can often learn enough, within a short period of time, to ask questions that may stump their doctors. A recent report from the Institute of Medicine, "Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion", however, may lead us to question whether information on the Internet is having any impact.¹

Health Literacy is defined as "the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions."² In research studies, health literacy is typically measured using a test, such as the Test of Functional Health Literacy (TOFHL), a timed reading comprehension test with multiple choice responses, which contains three passages about health situations and asks questions to measure a person's understanding of the passages.³ The IOM report highlights the problems of health literacy and suggests ways to overcome these limitations. Nearly 90 million people, half of the American adult population, have difficulty performing the basic reading and numerical tasks essential for functioning in the healthcare environment and acting on healthcare information.¹ Patients with poor health literacy have worse health outcomes and may be less likely to benefit from educational and disease management programs.

The policy implications of this are not clear, but poor health literacy is clearly a barrier to achieving quality of care goals, such as those from the National Committee for Quality Assurance. For example, a study of 408 patients with Type 2 Diabetes showed that patients with low health literacy were twice as likely as those with adequate health literacy to have poor blood sugar control.⁴ Another study of 2722 older adults observed that those with inadequate health literacy were less likely to have received pneumococcal vaccination, a mammogram or a pap smear.⁵

Experts suggest that one approach for improving health outcomes in patients with poor health literacy is to modify the way that doctors communicate with patients. It may be useful for physicians to assess the degree to which patients understand and can recall important health information.⁶ For example, in a study of conversations between physicians and their patients with diabetes, patients whose physicians asked them about their ability to recall or understand new concepts during visits had better blood sugar control.⁶

Another approach to helping patients to understand the medical concepts central to their care is to encourage patients to ask questions during medical encounters. Dr. Christopher Sciamanna, an Associate Professor in the Department of Health Policy at Jefferson Medical College, has developed an interactive website that suggests specific questions for individual patients to ask during their visits. This website is being studied to understand its effect on healthcare quality among those with lower and higher levels of health literacy.⁷ A similar approach is being used at Crozer-Keystone Health System, which has received a grant from the American Medical Association (AMA) Foundation. Crozer-Keystone plans to use the grant to develop a health literacy guide that encourages patients to work with their physicians and

caregivers to understand the answers to three critical questions: "What is my main problem?", "What do I need to do?" and "Why is it important for me to do this?" This approach is similar to the patient activation approach used by a separate project, the Partnership for Clear Health Communication, funded by Pfizer (www.askme3.org).

Given the low levels of health literacy in the population, interventions such as these may be critical for helping patients make informed decisions about their health care. Much research needs to be done in this area, as literacy is emerging as a key barrier to allowing the United States to cross the "chasm" to higher quality health care for all Americans.

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